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Charles McCabe

Himself

Nixon's Punishment

MR. STEVE MCNAMARA, publisher of Marin County's *Pacific Sun*, can hardly be qualified as a Nixon-lover. Yet it is his view that former President Nixon, who ordered men to commit felonies and has still escaped jail, was fully and condignly punished.

"Did Nixon get off easy?" he asked. "I think he got off worse and that his 'sentence' is nearly certain to break him physically."

Mr. McNamara says that Mr. Nixon "can't do anything but play politician. With that role gone, he is sentenced to spend the rest of his days as a nothing, a literal nobody . . . To be left alone as an object of contempt? That's much worse for a total politician like Nixon."

Most Americans, apparently, feel Mr. Nixon should have done time, as his confederates did. A recent Harris Poll says a 64 per cent majority still believe that President Ford was wrong in pardoning his predecessor. Another 63 per cent feel "the court system of justice failed on Nixon's involvement in the Watergate coverup."

As a Nixon-hater since the day he came to Washington, I tend strongly to the stance of Steve McNamara. The Watergate thing has been a crazy case. It has been but the tip of the iceberg of massive iniquity that characterized the two Nixon terms in office.

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IT IS perfectly true, I think, that Mr. Nixon in the slammer, unless he had been sent for life without possibility of a pardon, would have been a far more dangerous man to America than Mr. Nixon languishing in desuetude in San Clemente.

Though his lonely punishment has been severe, make no mistake about it — Brother Nixon is still a dangerous man. The day he resigned I was sitting on a terrace overlooking Lake Tahoe with a friend. My first words were, "Just watch, the s.o.b. will run for the first Senate vacancy in California." I still wouldn't bet against it.

The strongest argument for a jail sentence for Mr. Nixon is that he would be branded a felon and could not again seek public office in this country. For all of us, this would be a week of Christmases.

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YET THERE is the other side of this complex and wholly unprecedented matter. Suppose he had gone to jail? He still has an enormous constituency in the boonies, in segments of the more reactionary clubs, and elsewhere. There are still, incredibly, newspaper publishers who think he was jobbed.

Jail would have given Mr. Nixon the opportunity to enact copiously a role that he has played many times, that of the martyr. He could be St. Simeon Stylites one day, Giordano Bruno the next, and Joan of Arc on weekends. He would love the parts and he would do them well, because his only essential talent has been playacting.

Enough people would love this stuff that he would be a formidable political power on his release, though he could not actually seek office. He might become the greatest power broker since Marcus Alonzo Hanna. I do not care to think of the kind of people Mr. Nixon would endorse in that role.

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BEING a nobody, as Steve McNamara says, is just about right — right for Mr. Nixon in view of what he is known to have done, and right for the country. Just *not being a martyr* is a severe deprivation for a man of his curious temperament.

I do not think his exile will "break him physically" any more than Napoleon's first exile did. Mr. Nixon will try to come back. That is inevitable. It is a paradox that his NOT having been in jail will make the comeback just that more difficult. It may be that, in some unconscious way, we knew how to really hurt the guy.